AFRICA — South
South Africa

From the "South African Journal of Science,"
November, 1917.

ORIGIN AND MEANING OF THE NAME "HOTTENTOT."

By Rev. Prof. J. du Plessis, B.A., B.D.

CAPE TOWN:
PUBLISHED BY THE S.A. ASSOCIATION FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF SCIENCE.

1917

LIBRARY

ORIGIN AND MEANING OF THE NAME "HOTTENTOT."

By Rev. Prof. Johannes du Plessis, B.A., B.D.

The Bushmen, the Hottentots and the Kaffirs are the names under which we know the three great families of natives with whom the earliest colonists came in contact. The first name explains itself, the last is without doubt the Arabic *kafir* (unbeliever), and was bestowed upon the Bantu tribes of the east coast by the Mohammedan traders. But the name Hottentot is still wrapped in considerable obscurity, and the derivations hitherto proposed have not been wholly satisfactory. In dealing with the explanations that have been offered of the origin of the name, there are some which I think we are safe in rejecting, some which are certainly possible, and one which I venture to suggest as highly probable.

I. Rejected Explanations.

In the "Transactions of the Philological Society" for 1866, H. Wedgwood threw out the suggestion that the word Hottentot meant originally a *stammerer*. "When we enquire how the Dutch would naturally represent the sound of stammering, we find that they make use of the verbs *hateren* and *tateren*, both obviously imitative." He also quotes from the dictionary of Hexham (1647) to show that *hateren* meant to stutter, and *tateren*, to speak with a shrill noise.

Danby P. Fry, in the volume of the "Transactions" quoted above, says that in a Dutch and German dictionary published by Kramer in 1719, he found the word *Hortentot* in the sense of a stammerer, "and this," he adds, "may be the word referred to by Dapper." He also adduces the authority of Judge Watermeyer, whose words are: "Dapper asserts that a word like *Hottentot* was a word in ordinary use in Holland in his day to signify stammerer. . . . Dutchmen themselves would not believe it to have been a word in use in Holland before it was applied to the South African natives, but for the conclusive evidence of such a passage as this in Dapper."

Dr. Theophilus Hahn, again, in his "Tsuni-Goam," supplies us with another suggested derivation. "On account of their curious language, abounding in harsh faucal sounds and clicks, the Dutch called them Hottentots. Hottentot, or Hüttentüt, means in Frisian or Low German a quack; and therefore the old Dutchmen, who were so much puzzled and did not know what to make of such an unheard-of language, more akin to the chat of a parrot than to human speech, called it *Hottentot, i.e.*, mere gibberish" (p. 2). In support of this view he quotes the *Idioticon Hamburgense* (1755): "Hüttentüth, Schimpfwort auf einen unnützen Artzt, welcher beim gemeinen Mann heisset: 'Doctor Hüttentüth, die den Lüden dat water besüht'" (p. 32).

I feel that I, for my part, cannot accept these ingenious explanations. My first objection is this, that the men who were the earliest visitors to our shores were not learned philologists, who could put words like *hateren* and *tateren* together and coin a new word; nor would it occur to them to apply to the dirty and thievish natives a name that was opprobiously used to designate a quack. They were rough sailors, who would be likely to designate a strange people by some striking characteristic of custom or speech, and most probably in some imitative term. My other objection to the proposed explanations is that they place the cart before the horse; in other words, they explain the more ancient by the more recent, instead of *vice versa*. *Hortentot* in the sense of a stammerer, and *Hottentot* in the sense of a quack, are not the origin of the name as applied to the Cape natives, but are to be *explained from* the latter. In the second quarter of the seventeenth century the word Hottentot must have been quite a well-known designation for the Cape *strandloopers*, since van Riebeeck, in his "Dagverhaal," constantly uses it without explanation. The dictionary of Kramer, on the other hand, and the Idioticon Hamburgense were only published in the eighteenth century. The conclusion is plain, that the word Hottentot had by that time become so common that it was used to designate a stammerer in Holland and a quack in Germany; just as to-day it is used as a *schimpwoord*, or term of opprobium, in Cape Dutch.

Let me now pass to the

II. Possible Explanations.

The French missionary, Arbousset, travelling through Central South Africa in 1836, says of the language of the Hottentots that it is harsh and broken, and uttered with strong aspirations from the chest. "C'est comme si l'on n'entendait jamais que *hot en tot*. Aussi n'est-ce pas sans raison qu'on a dit d'eux qu'ils gloussent comme les dindons." ("Relation d'un Voyage," p. 480.) This is, of course, nothing but the old onomatopoetic derivation that we find very commonly in the books of the earliest travellers.

Wouter Schouten, who visited the Cape in 1658 on his way to the East Indies, says in his "Reys-togten"* that the Hottentots are

> Wilde menschen, die haer langs strant met heele troepen aen ons vertoonden. Deze worden Hottentotten, wegens haer klokkende spraek, die naer het geluyt der kalkoense hanen gelijkt, bij ons en ook andere natien genoemt. . . . . Zij worden van wegens haer wildheyt en klokkende spraek, die al hakkelende ver uyt de keel schijnt voort te komen, gewoonelijk Hottentotten genoemt."

The language of Dapper on this question deserves to be quoted in full, for upon his remarks not a few theories have been built, for which (to my mind) Dapper cannot be legitimately appealed to as authority. His "Afrika," which appeared in 1688, has the following upon the speech of the Hottentots:—

* 3rd ed., 1, 8, and 2, 182.

Hun sprake gaet geduurigh met klokken als de kalkoensche hanen, klappende of klatzende over het ander woort op hun mond, gelijk of men zijn duim knipte, zoo dat hun mont bijna gaet als een ratel, slaende en klatzende met de tonge overluit: zijnde elk woort een bijzondere klats. Zommige woorden weten zij niet dan met heel zwaere moeite te uiten, en schijnen die als van achteren uit de kele op te halen, gelijk een kalkoensche haen; of als de luiden in Duitslant aen d'Alpen doen, die door het drinken van sneeu-water kropzwellen aen den hals krijgen: waerover d'onzen hen ten opmerke van deze belemmering en ongehoorde hakkeling van tale den naem van Hottentots gegeven hebben, gelijk dat woort in dien zin gemeenlijk schimps-gewijze tegen iemant die in het uiten zijner woorden hakkelt en stamelt hier te lande gebruikt wort. Zij noemen nu ook zich zelfs met den naem van Hottentot, en zingen bij d'onzen al danzende *Hottentot brokwa, Hottentot brokwa*: waer mede zij willen zeggen, geef Hottentot een brok broot" (p. 652).

The question here is what Dapper really means by the sentence "gelijk dat woort in dien zin gemeenlijk schimps-gewijze . . . hier te lande gebruikt wort." Does he mean that, since the word Hottentot was known in Holland as a term of opprobium for stutterers, it was applied to the Cape natives on account of their clacking speech, or does he mean that the word Hottentot, connoting as it did a clacking speech, was in like manner ("gelijk") applied to stutterers in Holland? I am of opinion that the conjunction "gelijk" in the sentence quoted does not give a reason, but merely introduces an illustration. And I am upheld in this view by Dapper's own admission, confirmed among others by Kolbe, that the Hottentots originally called themselves by that name, or in some manner made use of a name or expression resembling the word *Hottentot*. So that, though I do not wholly reject the onomatopoetic explanation, I venture to submit evidence for a more

III. Probable Explanation.

Before I produce my evidence I wish to call particular attention to the fact that in the Dagverhaal of van Riebeeck, the Cape natives are consistently called *Ottentoos* or *Hottentoos*, the singular being *Ottentoo* or *Hottento*. In only one place have I found *Hottentot* as the designation of a single individual (namely in Jan van Harwarden's Journal, February, 1658), and this spelling is so rare that I suspect a misprint. Moodie has the following footnote (*Record*, p. 331):—

About this period (September, 1673) the present termination of this word (*i.e.*, Hottentot) began to take the place of the former (Hottentoo) —evidently from the necessity of introducing consonants to form the Dutch feminine Hottentottin.

Here, then, we have important evidence, which takes the bottom out of the theories of onomatopoetic derivation: the original form of the name was not Hottentot, but Hottentoo.

There is, however, one piece of evidence which points in the direction of an earlier form ending in *t*. Sir Thomas Herbert visited Table Bay in 1626, and he has the following sentence: "Only upon their feet (he is speaking of the natives) have they a sole or piece of leather tied with a little strap, which while

these *Hatten-totes* were in our company their hands held, their feet having thereby the greater liberty to steal." This seems to be decisive for the early use of the consonantal ending. But is it? My copy of Herbert is "the Third Edition, further enlarged—London, printed in the yeare 1677." I have not had access to a First Edition, but I should not be at all surprised to find that the "*Hattentotes*" only appeared upon the scene in later editions, when the word itself in the newer etymology had already found a footing.*

Now with reference to the origin of the name, I shall quote a sentence or two from travellers during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Père Tachard, in "A Voyage to Siam," undertaken in 1685, says: "The first nation in the language of the country is called Songuas (*i.e.*, Son-quas). The Europeans call those people Hottentots, perhaps because they have always that word in their mouth when they meet strangers" (*op. cit.*, p. 68). The Rev. J. Ovington, who was here in 1689, says: "They retain the vulgar name of *Hotantots*, because of their constant repetition of that word in their hobling dances." ("A Voyage to Suratt," p. 489.) William Dampier called at the Cape in 1691, and gives the following account of the name Hottentot: —

> The natural inhabitants of the Cape are the *Hodmadods*, as they are commonly called, which is a corruption of the word Hottentot: for this is the name by which they call to one another, either in their dances or on any occasion; as if every one of them had this for his name. The word probably hath some signification or other in their language, whatever it is.†

To the same effect, Francis Leguat (1698): ". . . the natives of that Province, whom the Hollanders called Hottentots, because they often hear them pronounce that word" ("Voyage to the East Indies," p. 226); and Captain Beeckman (1704): ". . . they are called by that name from their frequent repetitions of the word in their dancings" (quoted in *Mendelssohn*, 1, p. 108).

To the evidence already adduced may be added that of Kolbe, who, in his account of the Hottentots, leans upon and is backed by the far more powerful authority of the learned Secretary Grevenbroek. Kolbe, then, after quoting Tachard, refers to the opinion of Mercklin in his "Oost-indische Reisbeschrijving," who says of the Hottentots "dat zij, vrolijk zijnde, gestadig op en neer springen, en het woord *Hottentot* daarbij zingen . . . weshalve zij ook van de Hollanders in 't gemeen Hottentotten genaamd worden" (Kolbe, "Naauwkeurige Beschrijving," 1, 415)

We see then that the earliest evidence strongly favours the supposition that the name Hottentot was not a term imposed upon the Cape natives, but a term derived from them; and that the word had some connection with their ceremonial dances, and

* This I have since found to be the case. In the first edition of Herbert the natives are not called by any proper name at all.

† "Voyage round the World," 7th ed., 1, 539.

perhaps also with the greetings they employed towards each other and towards strangers.

I must now return to van Riebeeck's Dagverhaal—that still unexplored mine of information on the first ten years of the Settlement. On the 7th September, 1655, Corporal Willem Muller proceeded on an exploratory tour inland, accompanied by the Hottentot interpreter Harry. At a spot which cannot have been very far from Capetown, in the direction of the Cape Flats, they observed something which drew their attention, viz., "a strange proceeding of the Hottentot women, on the side of the path, where a great stone lay. These women went together each with a green branch in her hand, laid down upon their faces on the stone, speaking some words which we did not understand. We asked them what it meant, on which they said *Hette hie,* and pointed above, as if they would say, 'It is an offering to God'" (translation by Moodie, *Record,* p. 72).

Dr. Theophilus Hahn at once seized upon the importance of this little bit of information, and made the following comment on it: "As will be seen from the sequel of this chapter, the word *Hette hie* is only a distortion of *Heitsi-eibib,* and the form of worship described here at the cairn is nothing else but the Heitsi-eibib worship as it is practised to-day all over Great Namaqualand, etc." ("Tsuni-Goam," p. 36). I wish, however, to take the step which Dr. Hahn stopped short of, and to suggest that *Hette hie* was the expression which the early settlers heard so constantly from the natives, and from which they nicknamed them *Hottentoos.* I grant that the resemblance of *Hottentot* to *Hette-hie* is not philologically perfect, but if we remember that the last "t" is an addition of later date, and that the early sailors did not profess to give an exact reproduction of the native word, but only to coin a word that resembled it, the similarity must be admitted to be sufficiently close. At any rate, the proposed identification meets three conditions of the problem which, if we are to believe the words of the old travellers, must necessarily be observed: (*a*) the name Hottentot must be shown to be derived from, and not imposed upon, the natives of the Cape; (*b*) it must be a word that was uttered in connection with their ceremonial religious dances; and (*c*) it must be a word which could be employed in friendly greetings. These conditions are all fulfilled in the proposed derivation from *Hette hie.*

(*Read, July* 4, 1917.)